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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses parents' perspectives on child care as they affect research approaches. Consideration of the parents' perspectives and socioeconomic positions allows a better assessment of parents' interest in their children's preschool education. Parents fulfill many roles within their families and society at large. These demands lead to organization and prioritization of concerns. Parents differ socially, economically, and culturally. Based on the varying conditions faced by parents, research questions discussed in this report are: (1) what position the parent's interactions with child care take in their life situation; (2) what attitudes and conceptions of child care parents hold, and what information, in what form, they want about child care; (3) what expectations parents have regarding child care; and (4) how active parents wish to be, and what influence they want to have over their children's preschool situation. The area of influence represents an intriguing question, particularly because parents frequently enter into this role when there is some conflict to be resolved, but then recede from it when the conflict has subsided. Four levels of parent cooperation or influence in child care include: (1) participating in decisionmaking; (2) discussing decisions; (3) making proposals; and (4) accepting information. (JW)

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ED 389 432

Some aspects of the relations between parents and preschool

Paper presented at the Fifth European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education "What Should Be the Educational Objectives for Early Childhood Education (0-7 Years)?".

This paper deals with the parents' perspective concerning childcare. I am going to present some tendencies and thoughts that rise from my research. I want to discuss some questions that I find especially interesting.

Background

In public childcare the importance of good relations to the parents is stressed. Childcare is supposed to be a complement to the family and therefore a close cooperation between parents and the staff is required. Parent cooperation is a constant theme in discussions about childcare.

It is stated in official documents concerning preschool and school-age childcare that parents have a right to be informed about, have influence upon and take part in the activities that their children are attending. The official documents also state the obligation of the childcare services to make this possible in different ways.

In Sweden parents are working outside home, both fathers and mothers. This concerns bout 90 % of all mothers. Fathers usually work full-time, that is 40 hours a week, or more. Mothers either work part-time, 16-34 hours/week (about 40%) or more than 35 hours/week (between 41 and 45% depending on the childrens age).

One crucial factor for parents being able to work is that they know that their children are taken good care of, are "in good hands". For younger children (0-6 years) the supply of childcare is good in Sweden. Concerning the younger school-children (7-9 years) the supply is fairly good (51%). For children 9-12 years childcare is rare (5%) in Sweden but it does still exist.

In dealing with the relation between parents and childcare people usually take the perspective of preschool. The discussions, actions and research

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nearly always are about how to get better contact with parents and how to get them involved and it is implied that parents should conform with the perspectives, demands and attitudes of preschool.

Parents should cooperate by influencing the children to be capable, kind and wellfunctioning in preschool.

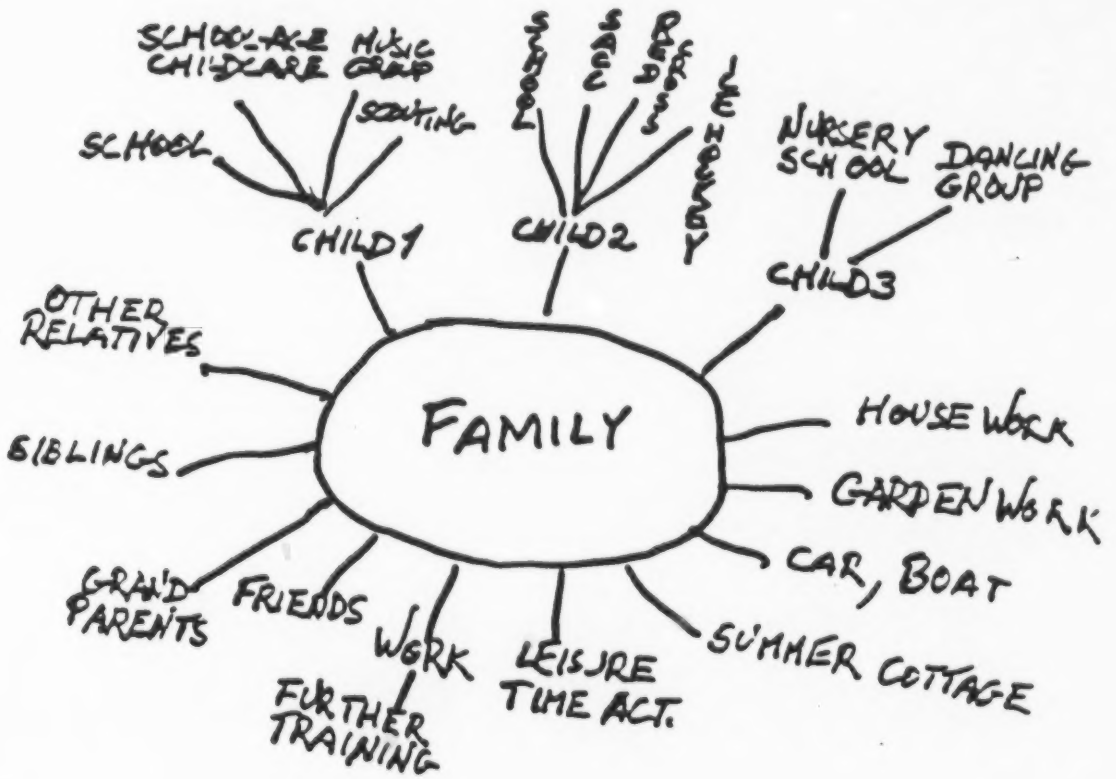
And when one fails in this, when the parents don't conform to the expectations of the staff, the staff is disappointed and defines the parents as problems, concludes that they don't care for their children and so on.

If we look upon it from the other side instead and try to take the parents' perspective and take into account the socioeconomic conditions of the family and what kind of support the parents need from childcare, then the picture can be different.

The role as parent

In modern society people have many different roles, for example citizen, employer/employee, parent, child, sibling, friend, wife/husband, consumer and so on. Every one of these roles demand time and engagement and conflicts between different roles can cause stress and disturbances. One of these roles is the role of parent.

Family life consists of many things as you can see in this picture



I call it my hedge-hog. This picture represents a family and its engagements.

Within the oval there are relations within the family, between the mother and the father, between the siblings, between the parents and the children and between each parent and each child. As you can imagine, in this area there is much that can enrich and complicate life. Then there are all relations and activities that each member of the family and the family as a unit have.

This particular family has 3 children and each of them goes to preschool or school and school-age childcare centre. Besides they have one or two activities each in voluntary organizations (like scouting, music-group or icehockey). On the top of each peg there are meetings for parents!!

Then the parents have their work and perhaps further training combined to that. They also have their own parents, whom they want to meet sometimes and who might need their help. The parents have friends, siblings and other relatives and at least they have to buy presents and celebrate their birtdays and other big events.

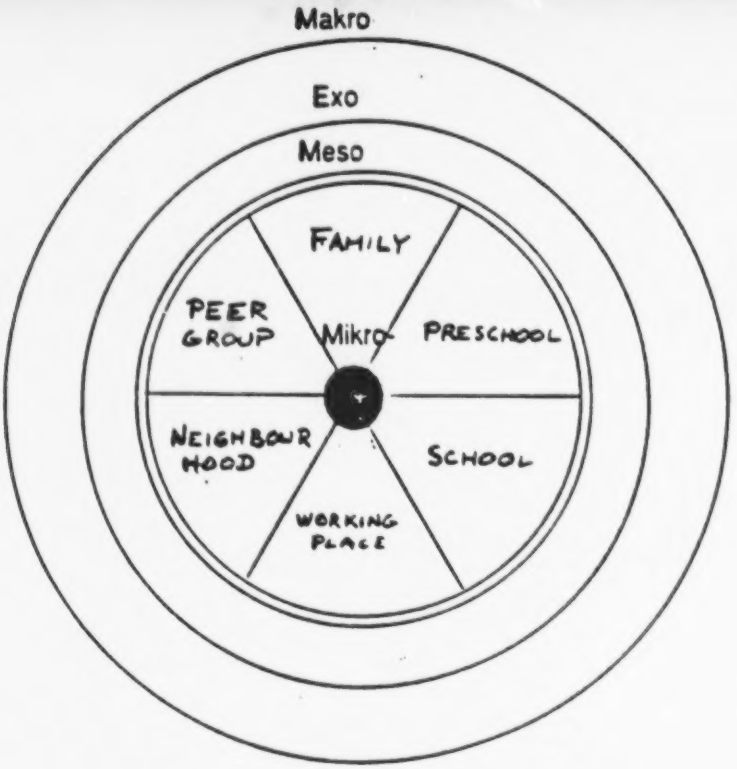
Leisure-time activities on their own is something that many parents want to have and try to get into their schedule (mostly in vain). This is what is cut out first when time gets short. Many parents feel sorry for this but as some 8mostly mothers) have put it "it only affects me".

And then there is housework, garden work and the car and the boat and the summer cottage and .....

And the time of the parents has run out long time ago!!!!

All this demands organisation and priorities to make it work. Every family has its own organisation and its own priorities. They can feel demands from different directions to be active and engaged. Sometimes these demands are clear and obvious, but sometimes they are vague and difficult to define.

This model of family life fits very well into the ecological model presented on the next page. In this latter model the links between the different settings are stressed. Se fig. 2



Parents are different

Another point of departure in my research is that parents are different. The cause for these differences are social, economical and cultural. This in turn means that parents views have a wide range of variation.

Different parents also have different views of cooperation between hom and childcare, about the distribution of work, about the territory of the parents and the territory of the staff. Parents also differ when it comes to the concept of knowledge - what is knowledge, what is important to know and to master. There are also different views of the ways to reach this knowledge and mastery.

The staff in preschool and school-age childcare has through their education got a somewhat similar view of the development, needs and interests of children but parents are seldom educated in this way. consequently parents have different views of child development, how to raise a child and meet childrens needs, interests and behovior. The difference between the views of the personnel and the parent can be small or non-existing and there can be a gap that is difficult to handle. This can be troublesome for all parties concerned.

In a project at the university of Stockholm three diferent types of living areas are involved. Among other things the researchers as parents about their views of cooperation between preschool/school and parents. Their result confirms my research and so does the results of Leif Ribom in Uppsala

(concerning parents' relations to school). The differences between parents with different backgrounds are unquestionable. (Fredriksson -95)

It is very common to hear childcare staff talk about parents as a homogenous group that they want to influence in the same way in the same direction.

My research

The aim of my research is to take the parents' perspectives in their relations to childcare as one of their many different roles. What is important to them and what are they willing to engage in?

I have made interwievs with more than 200 parents in different living areas in and around the city and in the countryside. Additional methods that I have used are observations and questionnaires. In my interviews and questionnaires I have asked about the parents' views about childcare, both in general and about their particular childcare center, the relation between job and childcare, expectations, cooperation, influence. I have also asked about other aspects of the parents' lives, such as economy, household work, childcare at home, spare time activities and support from others (friends, relatives, childcare center).

The main questions at issue are:

> What position does the parents´ interactions with childcare take in the picture of their total life situation (family, work, house work, living, spare time activities and so on)? What is their socioeconomic situation? What does it mean to them to have their child in childcare?
>
> Which conceptions and attitudes of childcare do parents have ? What information do they want and in what ways do they want it?
>
> What expectations do parents have concerning cooperation?
>
> How active do parents want to be? What influence do they want to exert?

I find it very important to grasp the span between different parents´views upon these questions.

Influence

An interesting, controversial and complicated question concerns influence.

In official documents in Sweden it is stated that parents ought to exert influence on the activities in preschool and school-age childcare (even to the extent that they participate in the planning and running of the provisions). It seems to be an axiom that everybody agrees to that - as long as you don't ask them personally. I have done that. Then it is not so simple any longer.

Through the years there has been a lot of attempts to increase the influence of the parents. Mostly this has been done by practical measures as increased number of meetings, parents participating in the activities, questionnaires to parents and so on.

At best this leads to a greater engagement from the parents and this is indeed a positiv effect. It doesn´t automatically mean increased influence though. Often this effect fades away as time goes and "everything goes back to normal again".

Staff in childcare often says that they want parents to be more interested, that is active and having opinions about preschool (or school-age childcare). They expect parents to give suggestions for the content of the meetings on the three dotted lines in the invitation and they often get disappointed. Very few parents have any suggestions.

But if a parent has his or her own idéas about what is to be learned or done in preschool, idéas that are not in accordance with the tradition of this preschool or this preschool teacher or if the parent asks questions which make the preschool teacher uncertain, then the parent is seen as a troublesome parent. The thing is to have the right suggestions.

In exceptional cases an enormous activity can arise in the group of parents. The cause of this activity often is a municipal decision to cut or even close down some "provision" or some negative change in the number of children or staff. Then most of the parents engage deeply, spend much time in meetings and search for and present support for protests.

This deep engagement is seldom maintained when the conflict is over, regardless of the result.

Why? Why is that? Shouldn´t parents always be interested in the everyday life of their children? These are common reactions I get from preschool staff.

My research shows quite unambiguously that all the investigated parents **are** interested in their children and their everyday life.

Another and to me more fruitful way of approaching the question about parens´influence in childcare is to put it in relation to the whole life situation of the parents. What kind of influence do parents want to exert and what is possible to them?

At first I find it important to examine the concept "influence".

I have looked in many dictionaries but in vain. There is no definition to this word, it is obviously not a problematic word.

When I talk to parents about influence I realize that it is not unambiguous. Regardless of what researchers or polititians or bureaucrats in official documents consider the conventional meaning of the concept, the parents have their own interpretations.

It can be anything **from** "that someone in the staff listens attentively when the parent tells her/him that the child will be picked up by grandmother this evening **to** participating in planning the activities. Or using his/her right as a citizen to vote for the right party (a party that represent his/her own views concerning childcare) or even be a politician and work actively for a certain question concerning childcare.

The parent´s interpretation of the concept influence on childcare has of course its foundation in the experiences of influence that he/she has made in other connections, for example working life or organizational activities. Ribom (1993) shows in his dissertation how parents' education and occupation is of great importance for their view of influence concerning different matters in school.

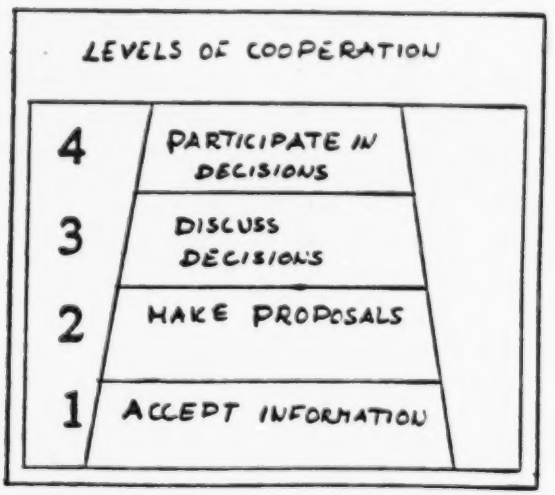
When we ask parents in questionnaires if they feel that they can exert influence on the activities (or on their children´s stay at the daycare centre), then we don´t actually know what they mean if they answer "yes".

In order to set this right, at least a little, I asked the parents to explain what they meant with "influence". In the questionnaires I used four categories of answer (namely those who were most common in the interviews):

1. Participate in planning the activities
2. Point of views that I put forward seems to be treated seriously by the staff
3. Discuss the activities
4. I don´t know how point of views that I put forward are treated by the staff

Experiences from the interviews show that many parents don´t distinguish between the concepts collaboration, cooperation and influence but instead look at them almost as synonyms.

Kristiansen (1995) has made a model of cooperation levels in schools where she has used four levels.



The lowest level is that parents let the school decide, accept the decicions and only want information.

On the next level parents put forward idéas concerning activities. Level 3 means that parents discuss decisions and activities with the teachers.

The highest level means that parents take part in decisions that traditionally teachers have made themselves. Kristiansen's result are somewhat astonishing. Before her "experiment" most parents and also teachers placed themselves on the 2 lowest levels. When parents had participated in the planning of the curricula of one year of "household knowledge" they discovered that they in reality had been on the highest level an they were very pleased with that.

What kind of influence did the parents in my investigations want?

Very few parents wanted influence in the sense that they wanted to plan the activities. Many said that they knew too little about the activities, the framework and the important documents to manage that. Several parents said something like: "Goodness gracious! that is the job of the staff. They are trained for that. I would not like the staff to come to my job to tell me how to run that."

Here the parents themselves make a connection to other roles, namely that of employee. They separate between different roles and don´t want to take the role as preschool teacher. A confusion of roles would bring too far and demand something they think they don´t master. Most parents express that they have confidence in the way the staff runs the activity.

On the contrary, and here you can find part of the answer to the questions about the parents´engagement in conflicts, many parents said in the interviews that they would act quite differently if they noticed that their own child didn´t feel good at the childcare centre. Then they would demand both insight and influence and they would spend "the time that was necessary" on solving the problem.

As long as everything works well and the child gets on well and wants to go to preschool in the mornings and the parent doesn´t see or feel discords, the parents (at least several of them) don´t want or have time for extensive contacts with preschool. Instead they can use their time and energy to master their own jobs. An effect of this is perhaps a lower niveau of stress which in turn makes parents feel more comfortable at home with their children.

The form of influence that most parents in my investigation seemed interested in is to be treated with respect by the staff. The parents want to be seen as people with knowledge and abilities, competent persons, let be in other connections. They want to be able to ask and get well thought-out answers (not cliché-like), question and get professional (not aggressive) arguments, make suggestions and hear either that it is a good idea and work it out together with the staff or get respectful explanations why it can´t work.

Another form of influence that parents like is the cooperation concerning their own child. The parents in my investigation wanted to have opportunities to discuss what their child especially needs (according to the parent) and they expected that the staff as far as possible tried to provide for these needs. In return the parents could accept the demands and expectations that the staff had in order to get the whole group of children to work.

Parent´s attitudes towards childcare

An element of importance is the awareness of what parents know about childcare even before they have their own child in it. Of great importance for the parent´s attitude to childcare is the source of their information. This "knowledge" affects the parent´s expectations of childcare and his/her behaviour in the first contact with preschool. When parents meet school-age childcare they often have experience from preschool and therefore this problem is not so frequent there.

If the parent´s information comes from a friend with a child in childcare then it is of course coloured by the experiences of that friend. The source of information can also be TV or other massmedia and what massmedia is sending and discussing is often problems and discords.

Most of my parents answered that they had a certain knowledge about childcare before they themselves got into it. This knowledge often came from a friend with a child in childcare.

Another common answer was that the parent had worked for a short time (as a trainee) in some preschool.

Of course many parents answered that they knew nothing at all about childcare.

I think it is important to be aware of the fact that different parents have different knowledge and attitudes towards childcare even before they enter the gate. This affects their first impression and perhaps also their continued contacts with preschool. This awareness ought to lead to different ways to meet parents.

What attitudes towards childcare did the parents express? Nearly all of them were positive towards preschool (all of them had got this form of childcare and this problably affected the answers).

They thought it was good for their child. What they especially stressed was that the child learned to take other children in consideration and that he/she could find playmates in the group. Another important thing to parents was that the staff is trained for their job.

Many parents stressed the fact that the preschool is always "there". Even if one preschool teacher is ill, there is always another teacher and the parents

can feel safe in relation to their job. Their own child can also get ill, of course, but what these parents had in mind was that a child minder can get sick and they didn´t find this form of childcare as safe as the preschool.

When it comes to the negative views of the parents the first thing to say is that they were not so frekvent. But they did exist. Some parents were afraid that their child´s individuality was obstructed, the group was too important sometimes.

Another thing that some parents didn´t like was that the groups were too big.

It is important to say that parents can be positive to preschool as a whole but still have some criticism concerning parts of the activity. Therefore it is interesting to let parents talk about different parts of their role as a parent. This gives room for nuances in their view of childcare.

There is a vide range of opinions about childcare and my analysis is not ready yet and that is why I don´t go any further with this question in this paper

I asked the parents what it meant to them to have their child in childcare. Very many parents answered "everything". It was extremely important to them in so many ways that the conclusion was "everything". It meant that they could have a job, could earn a living, could use their education. Another thing that many parents stressed was that they could go to work without a bad conscience because they knew that their children were in good hands.

Fathers and mothers meet preschool

In my interviews I also ask questions about house work and taking care of the children and so on. These questions are more important to understand the parents role as a parent than to understand childcare cooperation. In my interviews and questionnaires there are several questions but I will only deal with one aspect in this paper.

Who brings the child to preschool and who picks the child up in the afternoon? My impression without being able to present figures is that in many two-parent-families both parents take part in this. It is common that the parents try to arrange it so that the child´s stay in preschool becomes as short as possible. The parent who starts work the latest brings the child to preschool and the parent who finishes the earliest picks up the child.

Both fathers and mothers do have experiences from the entrance hall. And both of them have opinions about how the staff meets parents when they and their child come to preschool. One of the most crucial element in the parents´total view of a particular preschool is whether someone from the personnel comes out in the entrance hall to meet the parent and child. If a parent wants to be met but seldom is then the parent´s disappointment tend to spread and affect his or her attitude to the whole daycare centre.

Only parents who have answered that they always or mostly get a reception in the entrance hall are satisfied. If the staff comes sometimes or seldom, then many parents complain in their comments. A few parents answer that is doesn´t matter, but usually their children have attended the daycare centre for several years and parents and staff know each other well.

Information

Very few of the parents were familiar with the sozial and educational goals of childcare of their particular daycare centre. Many said that they probably had seen it or heard about it some time but they couldn´t remember its contents. Some parents tried to say something they believed it ought to contain. And they got very pleased when I told them that I wouldn´t question them.

It is not common, to judge from the parents´ answers, that preschool teachers explain to parents why they do what they do. Parents are often informed about what the children do, their rutines and activities, but seldom why. Sometimes parents ask this question and it can be met in different ways by the staff. Some see it as a serious question and explain the pedagogical or psycological reasons. Others feel threatened by the question and think that the parent is troublesome. Somewhere between these extremes you will probably find most of the staff.

I find it very important to deal seriously with this issue in the staff group. If parents are to get insight and influence on childcare such problems will be more common. Parents with little or no knowledge or experience of childcare enter quite a new world. It is an important task for the staff to lead the parents into this world. Several parents don´t even know what they don´t know. Often when I put questions about goals, aims and pedagogical strategies parents look puzzled. I ask them "Would you like to know this?" Mostly the parents say yes and one mother asked her husband to bring pen and paper so that she could write it down to ask the staff next day. "It is hard to know what to ask, she said".

To exert real influence parents have to know a lot about childcare. It is not enough to have used the right to visit the child a few days a year. Not all parents are interested in the task of seeking this knowledge or have time and energy to do so.

To sum up

In this paper I have dealt with some interesting and in my opinion important questions concerning parents relations to childcare. My conclusion is that parents have different views of and attitudes to childcare.Parents also differ concerning what information they need and what kind of influence they want to exert. To facilitate cooperation between parents and childcare the staff has to be aware of the fact that parents have a whole "hedge-hog" to cope with.